

RAIL CHRONOLOGY: Temporary rail replacement service between Bideford and Torrington in consequence of Bideford road bridge collapse - January 1968

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From the report by the British Railways Western Region Area Manager, Barnstaple, and supporting press references shown below, the following chronology emerges:

Tuesday 9 January 1968 (ca. 2130): Bideford Bridge becomes unsafe and impassable by even pedestrians

Wednesday 10 January: emergency rail service running from early afternoon

Thursday 11 January: emergency rail service running but ceased from that evening

Friday 12 January: no emergency rail service as the local authority had expected footbridge to be available from this day

Saturday 13 January: emergency rail service running

Sunday 14 January: *there does not seem to have been any service this day*

Monday 15 to Saturday 20 January incl.: emergency rail service running

The emergency train services, when run, were only between Bideford station and Torrington – with empty workings to/from Barnstaple Junction for crew change-overs at about 1400, and for overnight berthing. On 10, 11 and 13 January, the service was worked by D6336 diesel loco., the middle coach of a diesel multiple unit, and a BG (gangwayed brake van); during this initial period, trains had to run round at Torrington and at Instow (as the loop at Bideford was not available – passengers not conveyed between Bideford and Instow). From 15 January (the previously blocked line from Exeter having reopened) a single power car diesel unit was used.

Passengers were conveyed from Bideford station (East the Water) to Torrington where they transferred to Southern National double decker bus to reach Bideford town centre on the west side of the river – or *vice versa*.

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The Barnstaple Area Manager's report is reproduced in full at <http://www.railchronology.free-online.co.uk/Bideford-bridge-1968.pdf>

The relevant press references are:

North Devon Journal (every Thursday)

11 January 1968 issue

page 1 *reported the collapse of an arch of the road bridge "shortly before 9.30pm" on "Tuesday night" [i.e. 9 January 1968]. At press time, the bridge was closed but still intact.*

On Wednesday, "Bus and rail officials came out of a rapidly called conference with a 12 mile public service diversion for workers."

"Rail Shuttle Service. The Barnstaple - Torrington rail line, closed for passenger traffic since October 1965 was opened yesterday [i.e. 10 January 1968] as an emergency shuttle service. A one-coach diesel train is operating along the six mile track and linking up with Southern National buses at Torrington railway station. The round trip, from Bideford East to Bideford West is being provided free for commuting workers. At a mid-morning conference yesterday [i.e. 10 January 1968], called by the police, British Rail and Southern National officials worked out the rail-bus timetable. This is the timetable: Trains from Bideford to Torrington: 7.30, 8.30, 9.30, 10.30 am, 12.30, 1.30, 2.30, 4.30, 5.30, 6.30 pm. Trains from Torrington to Bideford: [15 mins later than above times].

Buses from Bideford Quay to Torrington Station: [10 mins before trains from Bideford].

Buses from Torrington Station to Bideford Quay: [same times as trains from Torrington]."

page 7: *"The road situation was partially eased when the rail service started."*

page 9: photo of freight – presumably 0615 from Exeter – stranded at Portsmouth Arms on the Down line

18 and 25 January 1968 issues

carried no reference to the rail service

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Bideford & North Devon Gazette and Devon & Cornwall Advertiser (every Friday)
12 January 1968 issue

page 1 *reported that the road bridge was “cut” on “Tuesday night” [i.e. 9 January 1968] “...and the railway line was reopened for a special passenger service to and from Barnstaple to Torrington (sic)...”.*

page 3: “British Rail last night [i.e. Thursday 11 January] withdrew the service to Torrington”. *[this was in response to the Council’s stated intention of requiring the rail service on 10 and 11 January only, and of having a pedestrian bridge available from 12 January – which proved to be over optimistic]*

19 January 1968 issue

page 2: *photograph of train at Torrington with text/caption: “Passenger trains again – but not for long! Not a ghost train but an emergency service train at Torrington which, like that [station] at Bideford, has come back into passenger use during the closure of Bideford bridge... British Rail reintroduced a limited passenger rail service link between Bideford and Torrington, to continue until the footbridge is ready at Bideford.”*
[issue also carried photograph of new footbridge being erected]

26 January 1968 issue

carried no reference to the rail service

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Western Morning News (weekday mornings)

Thursday 11 January 1968 issue

page 1: “A bus-rail service is to link East-the-Water with the rest of the town via Torrington at least until tonight... Five of the 60-seater emergency trains made the journey yesterday [i.e. Wednesday 10 January] to meet up with special buses at Torrington and a further 10 were due to run today. They will leave Bideford East-the-Water station at 7.30, 8.30, 9.30, 10.30, 12.30, 13.30, 14.30, 16.30, 17.30 and 18.30 (sic – no 11.30 or 15.30) and will return from Torrington 15 minutes later.”

Friday 12 January issue

carried no reference to the rail service

Saturday 13 January issue

page 1: “... Ferry services ... and emergency bus and rail services laid on...” *However, further down the page: “Throughout yesterday [i.e. Friday 12 January] efforts were being made to get a train service between Bideford and Torrington reopened and by late afternoon news came that British Rail had agreed to the service being reintroduced. The trains will link up with the special service operated by the bus company.”*

Monday 15 to Friday 19 January issues

carried no reference to the rail service

Saturday 20 January issue

carried photograph of temporary footbridge opened on Friday 19 January – first pedestrian crossing since bridge collapsed on 9/10 January. No further references to rail service.

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Express & Echo (weekday evenings)

Thursday 11 January 1968 issue

page 1: “... most [referring to people of East-the-Water] went by train to Torrington on the emergency free service which has been provided...”

Friday 12 January 1968 issue

page 1: “British Rail will not run their special trains to Torrington today...”

Late news page 1: “Efforts being made this afternoon to get rail service between Bideford and Torrington reintroduced.”

The (Exeter-based) paper carried no further references (not even mentioning the new footbridge when it eventually opened!)

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Bideford Railway Heritage Centre newsletter
Spring 2010 issue

An article by Clive Fairchild adds the following statements to the contemporary press reports:

- *Exeter – Barnstaple line blocked by floods early on 9 January so “stock” for the Torrington emergency service “could not be brought in from elsewhere and had to be made up of what was already available in North Devon. A three car DMU was being used on the Ilfracombe lines so its centre coach was requisitioned to provide passenger accommodation. On 10 and 11 January the train service was provided using an NB diesel (loco) no. 6336 and this DMU driving trailer no. W56297 plus an SR bogie parcels van.”*

- *“There was no service on the Friday” (12 January) - but does not explain why.*
- *“By Saturday 13 (January) the floods (on the Exeter line) had subsided and BR were able to acquire (sic!) W55014, a single unit railcar, and this operated the service for the remainder of the period. It stabled at Barnstaple Junction overnight and ran empty to and from Bideford each day” (and for middle-day crew change-overs – as evidenced by photos by Roger Joanes of such a movement).*

“This temporary service ceased on 19 January once the army had installed a temporary footbridge”. (This should not be read as meaning that the emergency service last ran on 19 January for the Area Manager explicitly states it ran on Saturday 20 January also).

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Branch Line News no. 98 of 26 January 1968 carried an initial report, which was amplified and corrected in no. 104 of 1 May 1968 on the basis of the Area Manager’s report.

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For contact address go to <http://www.railchronology.free-online.co.uk/#contact>